

PAPERS

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**SITUATION ON THE
LEFT IN EUROPE AFTER
THE EU ELECTIONS:
NEW CHALLENGES**

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The radical left at the 2014 European Parliament election: a first assessment

The publication of the final results of the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election of 22-25 finally permits to draw a first assessment of the performance of the radical left.¹

The election marked an important electoral advance for this party family, which won 12,981,378 votes (+1,885,574) corresponding to 7.96% of valid votes (+1.04%). This was matched by an even stronger increase of radical left Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), from 36 to 53, and of their parliamentary group (European United Left/Nordic Green left - GUE/NGL), from 35 to 52.²

On the negative side, the radical left failed to hit some key strategic targets. In terms of seats, the GUE/NGL did not fulfil the overblown expectations of some early opinion polls³ and did not reach the status of third largest force in the coming European Parliament. In terms of votes, its growth was overshadowed by the much stronger gains of far right Eurosceptic parties.

1. Electoral Results: Important But Uneven Gains

The aggregate score⁴ of radical left parties in European Parliament elections reached in 2014 (7.96%) its zenith since the fall of really-existing socialism, beyond the previous peaks of 1999 (7.59%) and 2009 (6.92%).

The electoral gains, however, were not evenly distributed across the continent (see TABLE 1). In fourteen countries the radical left improved its support but in twelve countries it suffered instead moderate or heavy losses.⁵

¹ All data are retrieved from the relevant official national source (usually the Ministry of Interior); results are still provisional in a few countries.

² The two categories do not entirely overlap. On the one hand, some red-green (e.g. the Danish SF) or regionalist (e.g. in Spain) radical left parties, as well as most ecologist deputies elected within radical left coalitions (e.g. the Catalonia ICV), have often opted to sit with the Green group. On the other hand, other kinds of parties have sometimes joined the GUE/NGL group for technical reasons (in 2014 the Danish Eurosceptic coalition, the German and Dutch animalists and an Irish independent).

³ Cunningham, K., Hix, S. (2014) "Socialist marginally ahead, radical left up to third", 5 March 2014, <http://www.electio2014.eu/it/pollsandsenarios/pollsblog>

⁴ This is the sum-total of radical left votes divided by the total valid votes expressed in the EU countries. The use of aggregate (or weighted) figures is preferable to that of unweighted simple averages of national results, as the latter tend to distort the overall size of party families.

⁵ In Malta the radical left was absent both times, Croatia was not yet a member in 2009 (but the radical left lost heavily compared to the 2012 EP election).

TABLE 1. RADICAL LEFT RESULTS, 2009-2014

	Votes 2009	Votes 2014	Change	share 2009	share 2014	Change
AUSTRIA	18,926	60,451	+41,525	0.66%	2.14%	+1.48%
BELGIUM	107,046	235,092	+128,046	1.63%	3.51%	+1.88%
BULGARIA	0	14,231	+14,231	0.00%	0.64%	+0.64%
CROATIA	-	34,380	-	-	3.73%	-
CYPRUS	106,922	70,130	-36,792	34.90%	27.09%	-7.82%
CZECH R.	334,577	175,027	-159,550	14.18%	11.55%	-2.63%
DENMARK	371,603	248,244	-123,359	16.38%	10.92%	-5.46%
ESTONIA	3,519	226	-3,293	0.89%	0.07%	-0.82%
FINLAND	109,948	167,006	+57,058	6.60%	9.66%	+3.06%
FRANCE	2,165,037	1,554,647	-610,390	12.57%	8.20%	-4.37%
GERMANY	2,004,500	2,220,724	+216,224	7.61%	7.57%	-0.05%
GREECE	718,790	1,934,025	+1,215,235	14.02%	33.82%	+19.81%
HUNGARY	27,817	0	-27,817	0.96%	0.00%	-0.96%
IRELAND	256,123	377,128	+121,005	14.00%	22.77%	+8.77%
ITALY	2,162,215	1,108,457	-1,053,758	7.06%	4.04%	-3.02%
LATVIA	0	6,817	+6,817	0.00%	1.55%	+1.55%
LITHUANIA	13,341	0	-13,341	2.43%	0.00%	-2.43%
LUXEMBOURG	9,740	14,773	+5,034	4.91%	7.25%	+2.34%
MALTA	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
NETHERLANDS	330,802	458,079	+127,277	7.26%	9.64%	+2.37%
POLAND	51,872	0	-51,872	0.70%	0.00%	-0.70%
PORTUGAL	810,571	636,833	-173,738	24.32%	20.96%	-3.36%
ROMANIA	0	9,803	+9,803	0.00%	0.18%	+0.18%
SLOVAK R.	13,643	10,287	-3,356	1.65%	1.83%	+0.18%
SLOVENIA	0	28,700	+28,700	0.00%	7.14%	+7.14%
SPAIN	823,329	3,174,027	+2,350,698	5.27%	20.78%	+15.51%
SWEDEN	182,140	234,358	+52,218	5.75%	6.31%	+0.56%
UK	463,344	207,933	-255,411	3.06%	1.26%	-1.80%
TOTAL	11,085,805	12,981,378	+1,895,574	6.92%	7.96%	+1.03%
VALID VOTES	160,105,511	163,109,024	+3,003,513	41.42%	41.17%	-0.24%

Successes were spectacular in several states of the periphery. In Greece the radical left soared to 33.82% of valid votes (+19.81%), becoming the largest national party family. This result was driven by the hefty gains of SYRIZA (26.57%), which confirmed its scores of the June 2012 national election and overcame the conservatives as the first Greek party. In Spain the radical left rose to 20.78% (+15.51%) thanks to the excellent debut of the far left list PODEMOS and strong gains of Izquierda Unida and the left-regionalist alliance Los Pueblos Deciden. In Ireland the division of the Trotskyist far left led to the loss of the seat of the Socialist Party but the rise of the left-nationalist Sinn Féin pushed the total radical left score

to 22.77% (+8.77%). In Slovenia, finally, the 2012-2013 anti-austerity protests provoked the emergence of a previously inexistent electoral radical left (*Združena levica* and *Solidarnost*) which scored 7.14%, although it failed to gain parliamentary representation.

These gains in medium-small nations, however, were partially erased by stagnating or negative results in the large states of the centre. Particularly negative were the results in the three countries: France (8.20%, -4.37%), where the *Front de Gauche* barely grew and the far-left *NPA* practically disappeared; Italy (4.04%, -3.02%), where the coming together of the whole radical left spectrum and several external allies in the coalition *L'Altra Europa con Tsipras* (AET) did reach its main target – a re-entry in the EP after five years of absence – but almost halved their previous electoral capital; and the UK (1.26%, -1.80%), where traditional far left groups almost didn't bother to run and obtained a mere 0.29% of valid votes – the remaining 0.97% was won by the Northern Irish *Sinn Féin*. Heavy losses were also sustained in the radical left strongholds of Cyprus (27.09%, -7.82%), where the communist *AKEL* paid the price of the 2012-2013 financial crisis, Denmark (10.92%, -5.46%), where the eco-socialist *SF* did not repeat the feat of the previous election, and Portugal (20.96%, -3.36%), where *CDU* and *PCTP/MRPP* somewhat gained but the *BE* more than halved.

This unevenness springs from the interaction of two main trends.

On the one hand, European Parliament elections clearly remain *second order elections*⁶ dominated by national issues and calculation. The marked innovations of the 2014 campaign – the selection by the main Europarties of *Spitzenkandidaten* for the role of President of the European Commission; televised debates between the main candidates – seem to have had a minimal impact in this respect, as the results of each party family have remained very inhomogeneous and voters' participation has remained extremely low.⁷ The only true element of “Europeanisation” of this election can be found, paradoxically, in the growth of parties critical of the current status of the European integration project: this dissatisfaction, however, has assumed highly different forms in each country, rewarding from case to case the far right (e.g. the French *FN*), right-wing nationalists (e.g. the British *UKIP* and the Danish *DF*), unclassable populists (the Italian *M5S*) and the radical left.

On the other hand, the increasing polarisation of European nation-states on macro-economic lines (a richer and exporting centre vs. a poorer and semi-insolvent periphery) has partially reflected on the radical left vote. While in the former results have generally been lukewarm, in the latter the radical left has often consolidated scores beyond 20% of the valid votes, strongly growing in Greece, Ireland and Spain and preserving an important audience in Cyprus and Portugal.

2. Parliamentary Representation: A Larger But Somewhat Heterogeneous Group

The electoral growth described in the previous paragraph has translated into very large gains of MEPs (see TABLE 2). Total radical left seats have risen from 36 (4.89%) to 53 (7.06%); *GUE/NGL* seats from 35 (4.76%) to 52 (6.92%).

⁶ Reif, K., Schmitz, H. (1980) “Nine second-order national elections – a conceptual framework of European election results”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 8(1), 3-44.

⁷ The overall share of valid votes over registered votes has further shrunk – slightly – from 41.42% to 41.17%. More worryingly, this share is below 35% in most Eastern European (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia) and a few Western European (Portugal, UK) countries, calling into question the quality of the European Parliament's democratic legitimation.

TABLE 2. GUE/NGL PARLIAMENTARY GROUP, 2009-2014

	Seats 2009	Seats 2014
CYPRUS	AKEL (2)	AKEL (2)
CZECH R.	KSČM (4)	KSČM (3)
DENMARK	<i>Folkeb. (1)</i>	<i>Folkeb. (1)</i>
FINLAND	-	VAS (1)
France	Front de Gauche (4) , AOM (1)	Front de Gauche (3) , AOM (1)
GERMANY	DIE LEFTWING (8)	DIE LEFTWING (7) , <i>Tierschutz (1)</i>
GREECE	KKE (2), SYRIZA (1)	SYRIZA (6)
IRELAND	Sinn Féin (1)	Sinn Féin (3), <i>Mike Flanagan (1)</i>
ITALY	-	AET-ind. (2), AET-PRC (1)
LATVIA	LSP (1)	-
NETHERLANDS	SP (2)	SP (2), <i>PvdD (1)</i>
PORTUGAL	BE (3) , PCP (2)	PCP (3), BE (1)
SPAIN	IU (1)	IU (5) , Podemos (5), EH Bildu (1)
SWEDEN	V (1)	V (1)
UK	Sinn Féin (1)	Sinn Féin (1)
GUE-NGL	35 / 736 (4.76%)	52 / 751 (6.92%)
COUNTRIES	13 / 27	14 / 28

Notes: bold = members of the PEL; italics = technical allies.

The GUE/NGL parliamentary group has expanded thanks to the net gains of existing members (+3 MEPs), the affiliation of previously non-represented radical left parties (+13 MEPs) and technical agreements with a few other non-leftist parties (+3 MEPs), while losing 2 MEPs due to the disaffiliation of the Greek KKE.

Despite these gains, the group remains relatively uninfluential within the European Parliament. Its overall size has increased only marginally, from the sixth to the fifth position (above the Greens). Its geographical representation, likewise, has increased from 13 to 14 countries (with the comeback of Italy and Finland and the loss of Latvia) and covers only half of the EU member states.

An additional challenge will be represented by a significant degree of internal heterogeneity.⁸

One important division will be that between parties affiliated to the Party of the European Left (PEL)⁹ (24 MEPs), other radical left organisations (25 MEPs) and technical allies (3 MEPs). The former, created in 2004, has consistently sought to strengthen the coordination the radical left within the EU institutions on “modernist” (downplaying their communist roots) and “Euro-constructive” (attacking the main thrust of EU policies but supporting the progress of European integration) lines; this has often created tensions within the GUE/NGL,

⁸ The organisation VoteWatch Europe (<http://www.votewatch.eu/>), for instance, points out that the voting cohesion rate of the GUE/NGL in the past legislature was the lowest of all groups save the EFD (79.37%). This rate is likely to sink further in the coming legislature.

⁹ See Dunphy, R., March, L. (2013) “Seven year itch? The European Left Party: struggling to transform the EU”, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 14:4, 520-534.

which retains a confederal character in order to accommodate the large ideological and programmatic differences between its member-parties. The latest move of the PEL, which has fielded Alexis Tsipras (SYRIZA) as candidate for president of the Commission, has indeed evoked much sympathy within the GUE/NGL but at the same time risks to alienate the more radical and Eurosceptic radical left parties – as the defection of the KKE to the non-attached MEPs indicates.

Another key question is the transversal rift around the issue of Euroscepticism, which requires delicate balancing acts both within the group and within most individual parties.¹⁰ The deepening of the Eurocrisis has somewhat sharpened the strategic elaboration and debate on the issue, as supporters of a reformed “social Europe” are increasingly pitted against advocates of a weakening or breakup of the EU, considered as a necessary step to free their countries from neo-liberal external constraints and to adopt progressive national macro-economic policies. The latter position is supported by several orthodox communist (KKE, PCP, AKEL), radical left (V) and other (Folkb.) parties, as well as by internal minorities in other parties. These forces, however, are themselves divided on the opportunity of explicitly calling for an exit from the Eurozone and the EU, as opposed to a partial renegotiation of existing commitments.

3. Past And Present

The long-term trajectory of the radical left in European Parliament elections is portrayed in TABLE 3. From the crisis and electoral decline of the Communist-dominated “old” radical left in the 1984-1994 decade (from 15.00% to 7.08%) emerged a reconfigured “new” radical left, which has since stagnated around 7-8% of total valid votes.

TABLE 3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION, 1979-2014

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Valid votes	60.15%	56.93%	56.40%	54.43%	47.27%	43.75%	41.42%	41.17%
RL votes (%)	14.80%	15.00%	11.48%	7.08%	7.59%	6.86%	6.92%	7.96%
EP seats (n.)	410	434	518	567	626	732	736	751
RL seats (n.)	46	43	45	29	43	42	36	53
RL seats (%)	11.22%	9.91%	8.69%	5.11%	6.87%	5.74%	4.89%	7.06%
GUE seats (n.)	44	41	42	28	42	41	35	52
GUE seats (%)	10.73%	9.45%	8.11%	4.94%	6.71%	5.60%	4.76%	6.92%
GUE countries	3/9	4/10	7/12	5/12	10/15	14/25	13/27	14/28

This trend was determined by two main components: growth and decline within existing EU members and the effects of the successive EU enlargements (see TABLE 4).

¹⁰ See Dunphy, R. (2004) *Contesting capitalism? Left parties and European integration*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, and Charalambous, G. (2011) “All the shades of red: examining the radical left's Euroscepticism”, *Contemporary Politics*, 17(3), 299-320.

In the original nine member-states the radical left swiftly declined from 1984 (14.93% of valid votes) to 1994 (4.25%), slowly recovered until 2009 (6.74%) and then fell again in 2014 (5.14%). The determinant factor was here the crisis of French and Italian communism, which was not sufficiently compensated by the growth of other radical left forces (e.g. the SP in the Netherlands or the PDS/Die Leftwing in Western Germany).

The 1981-1995 waves of enlargement, however, brought into the EU territories (including Eastern Germany) with radical lefts which had withstood better the collapse of the Soviet Union and were in average much stronger than their counterparts. The electoral results of this second group somewhat declined from 1999 (12.29%) to 2009 (10.33%) but swiftly soared in 2014 (19.30%). Despite having only one-third of the population of the first group of countries, they contributed more than half of all radical left votes.

The 2004-2013 waves of enlargement, on the contrary, saw the accession of countries with very weak radical lefts: these totalled in 2014 only 1.52% of valid votes. Within the former Eastern bloc the collapse of really-existing socialism left behind many former communist parties which successfully reconverted to social-liberalism but, with the exception of the neo-communist Czech *KSČM*, practically no viable radical left force. The only positive gain was Cyprus, where the communist AKEL managed to preserve and even increase its considerable electoral weight.

TABLE 4. EFFECTS OF THE THREE WAVES OF ENLARGEMENT

	1979	1999	2014
EU members in 1979 (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, West Germany, Denmark, Ireland, UK)			
Registered voters (n.)	184,474,494	207,497,569	222,958,570
Valid votes (%)	60.15%	45.07%	45.64%
Radical left votes (n.)	16,425,278	5,052,995	5,233,556
Radical left votes (%)	14.80%	5.40%	5.14%
1981-1995 enlargements (Greece, Portugal, Spain, East Germany & Berlin, Austria, Finland, Sweden)			
Registered voters (n.)		82,168,563	85,609,547
Valid votes (%)		52.83%	44.78%
Radical left votes (n.)		5,333,517	7,398,221
Radical left votes (%)		12.29%	19.30%
2004-2013 enlargements (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia)			
Registered voters (n.)			87,605,149
Valid votes (%)			26.28%
Radical left votes (n.)			349,601
Radical left votes (%)			1.52%

The 2014 EP election delineates a clear division of the contemporary European radical left in three relatively homogeneous geo-political macro-areas.

Across most Western Europe the radical left tends to be a medium-sized party family with some parliamentary representation and electoral scores between 4% and 10%. Negative exceptions are the extremely weak parties of the UK and Austria;¹¹ Belgium is slightly below the norm but growing rapidly; a somewhat positive exception of instead Denmark.¹²

The Mediterranean and Atlantic periphery, on the contrary, has become the vanguard of the present influence and future prospects of the radical left. The mix of a severe socio-economic crisis, large anti-austerity mobilisations and the presence well-rooted political organisations of different kinds, from orthodox communist to left-reformist and left-nationalist, has pushed electoral scores well above 20% of valid votes: since the beginning in Cyprus, since 2009 in Portugal, in 2014 in Greece, Spain and Ireland.

The former Eastern European regions, finally, resemble an archipelago of a few localised strongholds – Eastern Germany (19.74%) and the Czech Republic (11.55%), recently joined by Slovenia (7.14%) – in a sea of almost complete absence.

4. Future Prospects

This picture entails both opportunities and dangers.

At the level of formal EU institutional dynamics, the radical left is unlikely to leave a significant mark on the future course of EU policies. Within the European Parliament the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) groups, despite their losses, still enjoy a comfortable parliamentary majority (413 seats out of 751); conversely, an unlikely centre-left alliance of S&D, Greens and GUE/NGL (294 seats) falls much short of the required majority. Within the Council, likewise, the radical left influence will probably remain negligible: its past involvement as leader of one national government (Cyprus, 2007-2013) and junior partner in several other cabinets has passed almost unnoticed. Even a future electoral victory in Greece will probably have little effect, due to the small size of the country and the post-Lisbon expansion of qualified majority voting.

Things are different, however, if we look at the possible evolution of national political situations.

In several countries of the Southern and Celtic periphery the radical left is rapidly coming out of its previous marginality and now faces an historic opportunity to establish itself as the largest party family and become the leading partner of governmental coalitions. In Greece SYRIZA is likely to win the next general elections and, if the current crisis-cum-austerity will continue, it is no more inconceivable to foresee a further collapse of existing ruling parties and similar exploits of the radical left in countries like Cyprus, Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

At present, radical left parties appear to be quite unprepared for this eventuality. Partisan divisions heavily hinder the establishment of effective united fronts both for the present opposition and for a future governmental majority. The thorny problem of the relationship with the social-liberal left continues to prove divisive and risks snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, confining the most intransigent forces to a splendid isolation and the most

¹¹ The radical left of Luxembourg failed to gain representation due to the small size of the national contingent (6 MEPs) but scored a healthy 7.25% of valid votes.

¹² The figure retained is that of the SF (radical left but affiliated to the Green group), with 10.92% of valid votes; in addition, the Eurosceptic movement Folkb. (cross-party but mainly supported by the far-left E, affiliated to the GUE/NGL) gained 8.07% of valid votes.